ON A PETROGLYPH FROM THE ISLAND OF ST. VINCENT, W. I.

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The rock-inscriptions or petroglyphs which are found in various parts of the American Continent offer a curious subject of study, and one that may ultimately furnish valuable ethnological data. They appear to present definite characteristics both of subject and technical execution extending over wide areas, but not repeated outside of fixed geographical boundaries.

The one which I submit to the Academy to-night was photographed by Professor Benjamin Sharp in the Island of St. Vincent, West Indies, last winter.

The rock upon which it is inscribed is an ancient lava which had flowed into the sea, making a spur into the water, from which the inscription itself was about twenty feet distant. The lines were about a quarter of an inch in depth, the edges rather sharply defined, though from the nature of the rock and the action of the elements, they do not now present the appearance of having been formed by a cutting implement, but rather of having been ground in, as by a process of rubbing. Which of these technical methods was employed is of considerable interest, as will shortly be seen, but the present condition of the surface is such that the point must remain in doubt.

There is no question that this inscription is attributable to the native tribes who formerly occupied St. Vincent. These were the Caribs who had populated it from the adjacent mainland, distant about seventy miles. When first discovered, St. Vincent was the most densely peopled of all the Caribbee Islands and exclusively by this tribe.

One of the early writers says that they had many villages in its valleys and enjoyed entire repose from their enemies; hence it was selected as a rendezvous for the tribal bands from other islands and the mainland when organizing expeditions against their enemies, the Arawacks.[1] We may credibly affirm therefore that this inscription is a product of Carib art.

It is well known that on the adjacent portions of South America many petroglyphs have been observed, some of remarkable size and designs. They have been copied by Humboldt, Schomburgh, Wallace, Im Thurn and others. The last mentioned who is also the most recent observer, has made the important discovery that they are divided into two classes, differing widely in design and technical procedure. The one he calls the "deep" the other the "shallow" petroglyphs. The "deep" are from $\frac{1}{8}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ an inch in depth; the "shallow" are mere surface scratches; the former have been incised with the edge of a sharpened stone; the latter rubbed in by friction with a stone and moist sand. The figures represented differ, and the two varieties never occur together, nor even near each other. The shallow variety is seen on the Corentyn river and its tributaries in the extreme east of British Guiana; the deep occur on the streams west of that region.[2]

The present Indians know nothing of the origin, age or meaning of these monuments, and do not pretend to imitate them. The position they occupy is generally, but not always, close to some body of water. Not unfrequently they are upon almost inaccessible rock-surfaces, and could have been executed only with enormous toil and risk. This fact, and the well-known aversion of the natives to labor of any kind, are sufficient to invalidate the theory of Dr. Richard Andree that these figures were merely the product of idle hours, without meaning and without object.[3]

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[1] De Rochefort, Histoire des Iles Antiles de l'Amérique, pp. 24, 25.

[2] Among the Indians in Guiana. By Everard F. Im Thurn, p. 394.

[3] Ethnographische Parallelen und Vergleiche, s. 258.

Some, on the other hand, have attributed to them a profound symbolic meaning, or supposed they possessed far-reaching historical significance. This is an error quite as much too far on the other side.

I am convinced that in regard to those found in Guiana and the Carib district the theory of Professor Von Martius is correct. He believed that they were intended as conjurations for luck in fishing and hunting, propitiatory to the spirits of the fish and animals sought for, objurgatory towards envious or malicious supernatural powers.[1]

There is a passage in De Rochefort's *History of the Antilles* confirmatory of Von Martius' view, though he omits to quote it. This early French historian speaking of the island Caribs says: "To turn aside the anger of the demons whom they dread, they paint their hideous figures on the most prominent parts of their canoes."[2] He does not specifically say that they also engraved them upon the plain surfaces of the rocks, but there can be no doubt they did, as the Carib word *temehri* which is applied by them to rock inscriptions means "to paint" or "a painting."[3]

We may safely decide therefore that the photograph before us represents one of the Carib demons or deities, and that its figure was cut in the rock as a propitiatory act.

It may partake of temerity to proceed further, and undertake to identify a particular deity; but I am tempted to do so. The main figure of the glyph clearly represents a human form with arms extended over and laid upon the abdomen, but with no legs visible. The abdomen is disproportionately large, as if greatly distended. The suggestion is at once at hand that the figure is that of a woman in parturition. Immediately above the head of the figure is the rude representation of a human face, and another smaller one is to the left of the figure, both without limbs.

Turning now to the mythology of the Carib we learn that their principal beneficent deity was the Earth. They spoke of it as a female, as the good mother, from whom proceeded their food and other necessaries of life, and to her they paid their principal homage. They also regarded the sun and moon as animate beings, and

[1] Ethnographic und Sprachen-Kunde Amerikas, Band I, S. 571, 2 qq.

[2] Histoire des Iles Antilles, p. 479.

[3] Im Thurn, ubi supra, p. 394.

paid them much respect in their ceremonies, but not actual worship, as they did to Mother Earth.[1]

In the rock sculpture before us this evening, I believe we have these three nature-spirits represented, the Earth as the parturient All Mother, the sun and moon as accessories. The purpose of the carving was propitiatory to these powerful forces, and was intended as a permanent conjuration of their good-will.

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[1] See De Rochefort, ubi supra, pp. 469, 470.